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ABSTRACT

It is argued that high academic achievement among Vietnamese refugee and immigrant students is, in some part, the reflection of a survival strategy that has been employed over centuries of Vietnamese confrontations with more powerful peoples. Historical circumstances have reinforced a Vietnamese belief that a causal link exists between the opinions of outsiders and the welfare of the Vietnamese people. Long-term interactions between Confucian values and political conditions in Vietnam are at the root of Vietnamese assumptions about connections between academic performance and earning respect from outsiders. In addition, the immigrant status of Vietnamese in America promotes a belief in the importance of education as a way to advance. Evidence is reviewed that supports the assertion that the Vietnamese believe that they should be seen as lovers of learning in their dealings with other cultures. Implications for American teachers of Vietnamese children are discussed. Teachers should be aware that students may have high expectations that may be difficult to sustain, and they should be aware of a tendency for young Vietnamese males to associate almost exclusively with other Vietnamese. An appendix contains student responses to an incident of violence involving Vietnamese youth. (Contains 65 references.) (SLD)

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Promoting an Image:
A Vietnamese Success Strategy Throughout History

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May 1994

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Introduction

The primary contention of this paper is that high academic achievement among Vietnamese refugee and immigrant students is, in some part, the reflection of a survival strategy that has been employed over centuries of Vietnamese confrontations with more powerful peoples. Historical circumstances have reinforced a Vietnamese belief that a causal link exists between the opinions of outsiders and the welfare of the Vietnamese people. This belief is evident in the apparent cultivation by some Vietnamese of an image that Vietnamese people are "lovers of learning."[1] Taking an historical perspective of the circumstances of Vietnamese education provides a more complete picture of the academic achievement of overseas Vietnamese than do explanations that interpret such achievement as no more than the actualization of Vietnamese Confucian values or of immigrant ambition.

The perceived connection between the opinions of outsiders and the expected effect of success in school on these opinions was brought to my attention three years ago when I read student responses to a writing assignment in a Vietnamese weekend language school. Shortly after a fatal confrontation between four Vietnamese youths and police at a Good Guys electronics store in Sacramento (Gross, 1991), students in two of the weekend school's upper level classes were asked to comment on what had happened. The response below, translated from the Vietnamese, is similar to several published in the school's magazine (Dac San Huong Viet, Summer, 1990-1991). The original Vietnamese

paragraph and translated responses by two other students appear in the appendix.

> I think that what happened in Sacramento was very shameful for Vietnamese. I can restore the reputation of the Vietnamese by studying well and by being the top student in my school, so that foreigners will have to praise Vietnamese people for being intelligent (p. 23).

The young author expresses an awareness of a boundary between himself and non-Vietnamese, whom he describes as "foreigners." In this context, he presents himself primarily as a member of the group and secondarily as an individual. However, he has a sense of efficacy; although the actions of the lawbreakers have hurt the reputation of his group, he himself has the potential for restoring the group's reputation through his own actions. His duty to the group is to promote its interests by being the most outstanding student in his school.

Although the "model minority" thesis is commonly criticized among educational researchers as a myth that masks Asian diversity and the needs of many academically and socially unsuccessful Asian youths (Divoky, 1988; Li, 1988; Magner, 1993; Okutsu, 1989), a significant body of reports (Bell, 1985; Caplan, Whitmore, & Choy, 1992; Rumbaut & Ima 1988; Wright, 1989) does indeed provide evidence that a high proportion of Vietnamese students are, in Rutledge's (1992) words, "succeeding at an exponential rate" (p. 148).

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One phenomenon, described by Schorr (1988) as "the mystery of the Vietnamese valedictorian" (p. 246), is the high representation of Vietnamese students among valedictorians and salutatorians in high school graduating classes. Rumbaut and Ima (1988) found, for example, that in San Diego schools with more than 1% Southeast Asian students, 11 of the 47 valedictorians and salutatorians for 1986 were Vietnamese. This figure represented more than three times the proportion of Vietnamese among graduating seniors. Numerous stories of the academic success of individual Vietnamese students have appeared in the popular press, as well (Lee, 1991; Estes, 1989).

The success of a high percentage of Vietnamese and other Asian students is usually explained by researchers as the outcome of either; (1) Confucian values that place a premium on educational achievement, especially as school success helps to fulfill the student's duty to his or her parents, or (2) an expression of immigrant vitality, the combination of pent-up ambitions with the immigrant's perceived opportunities to improve one's lot.

I will argue that, given the evidence presented, neither of these explanations can alone account for the perspective expressed by the students in the Vietnamese language school and by others who are cited in this report. Historical information supports the argument that long-term interactions between Confucian values and political conditions in Vietnam are at the root of Vietnamese assumptions about connections between academic

performance and earning respect from outsiders. There is also a resemblance between historical Vietnamese perspectives regarding academic achievement and those expressed by Vietnamese in the United States. Further, pre-immigration interactions between cultural beliefs and historical circumstances may also help to account for survival strategies among other minorities.

Explanations for Asian Academic Achievement

Of the two most common interpretations of the academic success of Asians in the United States, one proposes that Confucian-based cultural values predispose them to work harder in school. The other explanation contends that the conditions of Asian inclusion into the United States have favored them and other voluntary immigrants over those minorities, such as Native Americans and African Americans, who, through conquest or slavery were forcibly incorporated into the United States.

The Contribution of Confucian Values

Commentators on the academic achievement of Asian children in American schools commonly credit traditional values, particularly the Confucian emphasis on moral and intellectual training and on one's filial obligations towards elders, as primary contributors to school success. Sociologist William Liu asserts that "the Confucian ethic remains the strongest determinant of behavior by Asian-Americans" (Butterfield, 1986, sect. 12, pp. 18-23). Note, however, that Confucianism is assigned by some commentators a less significant role in Vietnamese culture than in the cultures of the "Far East" (i.e. China, Korea, and Japan). See the

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special issue "Confucianism in Vietnam" of *Vietnamese Studies* (1994) for some Vietnamese interpretations of the past and present role of Confucianism in Vietnam.

Educational researchers have also assigned a prominent role to Confucian values in determining attitudes towards education, as well as towards life in general. Trueba, Cheng, and Ima (1993) claim that "for Chinese, Koreans, Japanese, and to some extent Vietnamese, the Confucian philosophy is very much alive and becomes a powerful force in their daily behaviors, attitudes and practices..." (p. 29). Caplan et al. (1992) found that among refugee students from Vietnam and Laos, those who identified themselves on a survey of philosophical and religious ideologies as adherents of Confucian values had the highest average GPA (p. 209). The authors do not describe how these religious ideologies were described or presented in the survey.

The causal relationship between Confucian values and success in school is attributable to two elements in Confucian thought: first, success is primarily the fruit of hard work, and, second, one of the child's filial obligations is to do well in school. "That people can always be improved by proper effort and instruction is a basic tenet of Confucianism" (Butterfield, 1986, p. 21). A greater degree of hard work among Asian children, as measured by the amount of time spent on homework, has been well-documented in numerous cross-national studies (see Chen and Stevenson, 1990). An analysis of survey data in the United States (Peng, Owings, & Fetters, 1984) reveals similar

differences between Asian-Pacific and non-Asian-Pacific students in this country. Furthermore, studies of academic motivation (Mizokawa and Ryckman, 1990) have generally shown that Asian-American parents ascribe success in school to effort to a higher degree than do other parents.

That Asian children are imbued with a sense of duty toward their parents, and that school achievement is a family affair is also supported by research (Caplan et al., 1992). Stevenson and Lee (1990) conclude their study of multinational children with the observation that, in contrast with American children, "going to school and doing well academically are [Taiwanese and Japanese] children's two main responsibilities" (p. 98).

Leichty's (1963) comparative psychological survey of 47 fourth- and fifth-grade Vietnamese students in Vietnam and 60 American children in the same grades in the United States revealed striking differences in orientations toward the self and toward the family. The majority of Vietnamese responses to prompts about the future expressed an obligation to the family: "When I am older, I will pay back my debt of gratitude to my parents" (p. 48). American children responded, on the other hand, with wishes for things for themselves, such as a pet or a swimming pool.

Immigrant Vitality

The second approach to explaining the school success of many Asian children in the United States is to contrast their academic achievements with those of other minority children and to account

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for differences in terms of their relative status as minorities in the United States. DeVos (1966) has shown that the way in which a minority group perceives its status relative to the majority affects the academic performance of its children, and Gibson (1985) and Suarez-Orozco (1989) have confirmed that school success among minority students in the United States is not restricted to groups from Confucian-influenced cultures.

Ogbu (1990, 1991) argues that minority status and educational performance can be best understood in terms of the historical relationship each minority has had to the dominant society. He distinguishes between high achieving American minorities, who have immigrated to the United States voluntarily, and minorities who were incorporated into this country against their wills. These groups are differentiated in their perception of the opportunities open to them in the larger society.

Because the relationship of recent immigrants to the dominant society is new, immigrant optimism regarding the future has yet to be tempered by social or economic barriers to success. Having left their homelands in search of economic opportunities, immigrants perceive new barriers as less daunting than those in their homeland. In contrast to African Americans and Native Americans, new immigrants are somewhat oblivious to prejudicial treatment by the dominant group. Their former life in the home country serves as the reference point for their assessment of success in the new society.

The contextual interaction approach (Cortés, 1986; Sue and Padilla, 1986) proposes that voluntary, as well as involuntary, minorities develop attitudes toward achievement that are a direct result of their interactions with the majority culture. Home cultural values interact with closed and open doors of opportunity in the host country to provide immigrant groups with an idea of their most likely means of success, their most favorable social and economic niche in the new society.

Finally, Espiritu's (1989) twice-minority thesis asserts that pre-emigration experiences among such minority groups as the Chinese from Vietnam have prepared them to function as minorities in a new adopted country. Having already developed strategies for surviving as minorities in their native country, they have a highly developed appreciation of, for example, the need to establish solidarity among themselves for survival in new contexts. They are therefore more able than first-time minorities to confront the challenges of minority status.

Neither the contextual interaction approach nor the twice-minority explanation, however, expressly addresses the effect on immigrant survival strategies of the pre-emigration experience of majority peoples who have been colonized or otherwise controlled by more powerful nations. The following review of historical contexts of education in Vietnam will provide evidence that interactions between Vietnamese and those who dominated them before emigration have provided Vietnamese with a success strategy that they have brought to the United States.

Education as the Primary Means of Advancement

When they adopted, in the 13th century, a Confucian-based examination system and civil service that encouraged somewhat open competition among all classes, the Vietnamese established educational attainment as the primary means of social betterment. Subsequent Vietnamese experience with extremely limited educational opportunities under the French further inflated the social and economic value of academic credentials.

Advancement Under the Confucian Model

China introduced Confucian-based schooling to Vietnam during the period of Chinese rule that began in 111 B.C. and ended in 939 A.D. However, Chinese administration sparked a long Vietnamese drive of resistance to maintain and reinforce a distinct Vietnamese identity. After it became an independent vassal state, Vietnam established its first institution of higher learning in 1076 for the education of males in the royal family. In 1253 formal education was made available to commoners, who were selected by regional examinations. The form of these examinations, Chinese characters, and their content, primarily classical literature and philosophy, mirrored those of China. Those who aspired to the mandarinate had to pass a series of tests, first at the local level, then at the regional level, and finally, at the national capital. The last mandarinate examinations were held in 1919.[2]

As an independent state, Vietnam began to undergo the development of a sharp distinction between an elite, Confucian-

educated class, and peasants.[3] Under the Chinese-influenced education system, virtually all roads to advancement out of peasantry led through the royal examination halls. Only those who could prove their mastery of the intellectual and moral disciplines could be advanced to positions of social responsibility. "The importance of state examinations can hardly be overemphasized, since they constituted practically the only road to officialdom, in the same way as education was virtually the sole means of social mobility in a Confucian society" (Duong, 1958: p. 4). The number of those who passed the exams comprised only a small percentage of the candidates.

Vietnamese folk literature abounds with stories that feature young men[4] preparing for their examinations. In these stories, families invest their savings in order to provide tutors and materials for a son, who might for years be permitted to do nothing but study. In his review of popular songs about the lives of young men studying for examinations, Le (1971) describes how "everything depended on the way [the candidate] worked--a glorious future, a high post at court, and the lovely fiancée who would wait for him." (p. 107). This fiancée might also remind the candidate of his filial responsibility: "Our parents on both sides are old; they count on you, since you are educated, to help them for the rest of their lives" (p. 107).

Families of successful candidates were not the only ones to benefit from their sons' and husbands' advancement into the civil service. Vietnamese villagers would also assess their own

respectability on the basis of the success of the candidates their village had sent to the exams (Woodside, 1991). In their comparative cultural analysis, Henkin and Nguyen (1981) also appraise the consequences for the group of an Vietnamese individual's success or failure: "When one congratulates a successful candidate upon passing a competitive examination, for example, he does not congratulate the candidate alone.... A popular Vietnamese adage suggests that when an individual does something wrong, the whole group to which he belongs is dishonored; when an individual does something laudable, the whole group is honored" (p. 35).[5]

Advancement Under the French and After 1954

The imposition of French control over Vietnamese institutions following France's conquest of Vietnam in 1883 ultimately resulted in the dissolution of the centuries-old process of climbing the social ladder through education by means of the mastery of classical Chinese literature and philosophy. But the French-controlled educational system resembled the one it replaced in its function as the exclusive means of attaining a position of status in the government. It was by tightly restricting schooling opportunities and by rigidly defining educational standards that the French superimposed their own academic template over the ancient Vietnamese tradition of an educated elite. French-determined academic competencies became the determinants of social advantage and of the size of the corps

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of the few privileged Vietnamese who could enjoy higher status by attaining educational credentials.

The French imposed a standard system of education with a uniform syllabus for all schools. Highly selective examinations at the end of each year limited the number who could continue. Students who were eligible for education beyond the elementary level had to attend *lycées* and *collegès* in the cities. Throughout the country, however, only 14 secondary schools functioned during the French period (Jumper and Nguyen, 1962). Secondary programs culminated in an examination for the *baccalauréat*. Only those with the *baccalauréat* were qualified for education overseas or in the University of Hanoi, the only Vietnamese university until 1949. The medium of instruction at the university was French, and the entire teaching staff consisted of French nationals.[6] The highest governmental positions were open only to those Vietnamese who were graduates of universities in France (Minh, 1969).

A Vietnamese perspective regarding French standards of success was expressed in Vietnamese-authored fiction of the period. Yeager's (1987) analysis of Vietnamese novels written in French during the colonial period provides some insight into how Vietnamese may have associated the attainment of credentials with social success under French control. As with previous genres of Vietnamese literature, the struggling student pursuing success in the examinations is a frequent motif. In the novels referred to below, Vietnamese students in France encounter the conflicting

pulls of French and Vietnamese identities. These young students are portrayed as striving to acquire the accoutrements of Western learning in order to earn the respect of their French colonial masters.

Ba-Dam [The Frenchwoman], is a story told from the point of view of the French woman who marries Sao, a French-educated Vietnamese. Sao is described as going to Paris "in search of Western diplomas and a French wife, the validation of his success" (Yeager, 1987, p. 77). In *Nam et Sylvie*, Nam also believes that his education will win him respect: "I found out that [Sylvie's mother] did not like Annamites [a pejorative term for Vietnamese that reflected their colonial status] until the day she read my diploma" (quoted and translated in Yeager, 1987, p. 81). In both cases the young students believe that without French academic credentials that establish them as more than "Annamites," they have no chance of furthering their own interests, even in Vietnam.

The pursuit of formal education by young Vietnamese continued to be intense after the French departure in 1954, according to Nguyen Ngoc Phach, a former BBC correspondent, who describes educational competition in the decades before 1975:

> The schools were incredibly overcrowded. Sometimes there were 60 or 70 students in a class. The competition was much fiercer than anything I've seen anywhere.... You didn't discuss the merits of academic achievement. You achieved it! It was one of the few things the Vietnamese didn't question.

As the war went on, we became cynical, and we questioned many values. But academic performance was one of the values we didn't question--ever! (Hawthorne, 1982, p. 70).

Vietnamese Promote an Image as Lovers of Learning

The primary thesis of this paper is that Vietnamese have a strategy for success that is based on the belief that the opinions of significant outsiders are important to their own welfare and that these opinions are dependent on outsiders' perceptions that Vietnamese are a highly refined, intellectual people. When Vietnamese attain high academic accomplishments, they live up to the studious image which they have projected, as well as providing further justification for the claim that they are lovers of learning. This section will review a body of evidence from outside observers, as well as Vietnamese sources that supports these contentions.

Vietnamese Awareness of the Love of Learning Image

The weight of evidence collected from a variety of published materials in English and Vietnamese strongly supports the argument that the Vietnamese believe that they are or should be perceived by others as lovers of learning.

In an article that was first published in Saigon in 1959, Tan (1974) describes Vietnam as "a nation that loves literature." He presents evidence (here in translation) that outsiders do indeed believe that Vietnamese are lovers of learning:

The Chinese ascribed to Vietnam the term "civilized state" to indirectly acknowledge the literary talent and the glorious

careers of Vietnamese poets and men and women of letters.... The French intellectual J. P. Dannaud ... commented once that the people of Vietnam were the most studious in the world (le peuple le plus studieux de le Terre)...; the Chinese often say, "Vietnamese are 'destined to love' literature; to grasp this, one has only to note the throngs of candidates who rush to school to participate in competitive exams (pp. 295, 296).

Tan (1974) presents an array of outside sources to confirm that Vietnam has achieved a glorious level of civilization. This achievement recognizes a Vietnamese affinity for literature and its ability to produce literature of quality comparable to the best in the world. Not coincidentally, these assessments are provided by two former oppressors of Vietnam, China and France.

In contrast with Tan (1974), who ascribes certain images of Vietnamese people to non-Vietnamese, Luong (1971) explains, in this translation from the Vietnamese, how love of learning is instantiated within Vietnamese society: "Vietnamese love learning, not because of a thirst for knowledge, but only because they want to attain a dominant social position" (p. 236).

Caplan et al. (1992), outsiders to Vietnamese culture, provide a third perspective, an analysis of how love of learning may be put into practice in a family setting. These researchers observed Southeast Asian families working cooperatively on the children's homework while sitting at the dinner table after their evening meal. Two aspects of love of learning were inferred. The first was the intrinsic pleasure of intellectual growth,

experienced as the accumulation of new knowledge and ideas, and as a sense of increased competence. The second aspect involved older siblings' satisfaction in seeing their younger brothers and sisters learn from them as tutors.

Promoting a Positive Image Historically

A frequent theme in stories about the Chinese-Vietnamese relationship when an independent Vietnam was also a nominal vassal to China involves how Vietnam often succeeded in convincing the Chinese that they had an extremely high level of civilization. Tran (1971) claims that the strategy of impressing the Chinese court and Chinese envoys helped Vietnam to "contain" China. If the Chinese had believed that their weaker neighbor had lacked a deep understanding of the thoughts of Confucius and was therefore uncivilized, the Chinese might have considered it their civilizing obligation to retake control of Vietnam so as to provide it with the cultural instruction necessary for an independent state. Aware of this potential threat, the Vietnamese always sent their foremost poets and writers to the Peking court. To complete the effect, they also disguised their best scholars as boatmen or innkeepers whenever they were alerted to secret visits by Chinese envoys.[7]

The most famous Vietnamese ambassador to China, Mac Dinh Chi, is renowned among Vietnamese precisely for the impression he made on the Chinese. Tran (1971) tells how Mac Dinh Chi's many displays of poetic brilliance and mastery of Chinese learning led the Chinese emperor to eventually award him with a "two country"

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doctorate, effectively establishing the ambassador as the most eminent of all intellectuals, not only in Vietnam but in China as well.[8] Tran's (1971) concluding remark in his account of Vietnamese diplomats to China reveals his assessment of the impact of intellectual diplomacy on the Vietnamese self-image:

> With the French colonialization of Vietnam in 1884...the literary cold war between the two countries was over. In many ways, this was most unfortunate, as it deprived the Vietnamese of invaluable anecdotes and poems that captivated the minds of the Vietnamese...and strengthened their faith in the intellectual power of their nation (p. 127).

The defeat by the French expeditionary force in 1883 was in many ways more humiliating for the Vietnamese than reconquest by the Chinese could have ever been. After having established their intellectual equality with the Chinese, the Vietnamese came under the control of a nation that belonged to the barbarian sphere. Moreover, the tradition-honored social structures, their village schools, their examination system, the civil service, even the Chinese characters that embodied the Confucian principles of their society, were forcibly replaced by those of an alien culture. However, the Vietnamese continued to ascribe great significance to their being perceived as lovers of learning by the French, whose own proud tradition of literature and philosophy became the subject of study under the new system.

Vietnamese educated under the French system displayed a sensitivity to how the French assessed their native intelligence.

Commenting on the earliest appearance of Vietnamese-composed works in French, literary analyst Bui Xuan Bao asserts that "essays and criticism reveal an erudition and intellectual maturity that...rival the...knowledge...and originality of French scholars" (quoted in Yeager, 1987, p. 47). Nguyen Tran Huan, another commentator on Francophone literature, explains why some Vietnamese chose to write in French: "These writers wanted to show they were sensitive, intelligent, rational, and capable--in a word, 'civilized'" (quoted in Yeager, 1987, p. 54).

The self-promotion by some Vietnamese of a love of learning image continues today under the auspices of the present government. *Vietnam Pictorial*, a monthly magazine published by the Vietnamese government in English and other foreign language editions, produced an issue in 1993 that features articles on education in Vietnam. Under the regular feature "Facets of the National Culture," appears an article entitled "The Traditional Love of Study in Vietnam." Citing heroic efforts throughout history of young scholars who pursued high academic degrees in the face of great adversity, the author claims that "there is a long-standing love of study in our country which along the centuries has helped our people build a brilliant national culture and civilization" (p. 30). Statements like these should be expected to assure Vietnamese of their people's high level of civilization and learning, to assist parents and teachers in the socialization of the next generation, and, when translated into other languages, to promote among outsiders the image that

Vietnamese have achieved a praiseworthy culture that is characterized by the veneration of scholarly pursuits.

The Vietnamese "traditional love of study" is indeed also fostered by the publications of Vietnamese expatriates. A case in point is a bilingual Who's Who of prominent Vietnamese refugees (Trong, 1993), in which the author has compiled biographical materials "to remind about our people's noble traditions, such as family union, children's filial piety toward parents, love and loyalty between husband and wife, *students' fondness of study* (italics added)" (p. 15).

Promoting a Positive Image in the United States

Soon after the arrival in the United States of the first Vietnamese refugees in 1975, American educators were apprised by government agencies to expect students who had a love of learning. The National Indochinese Clearinghouse (1976) advised teachers in a manual for refugee education that they would encounter Vietnamese students who would be hard working, would show a high level of respect for educators, and would be ambitious for success at the post-secondary level. In a two-page analysis of "the Vietnamese attitude toward learning," love of learning was described as a "traditional, deep, and almost subconscious respect for the learned and their learning" (p. 115). The authors of the manual predicted that, "if [love of learning] is preserved by the refugees in their new life in America...a good proportion of the Vietnamese refugee children

can be expected, in time, to find their way into American universities and colleges" (pp. 116-117).

It is commonplace for guides to the cultural values of Vietnamese refugees (Brigham Young University, 1981; Nguyen and Burmark-Parasuraman, 1981) to cite a high Vietnamese appraisal of formal learning. Huynh (1989), for example, asserts that "the Vietnamese value system is based on four basic factors: allegiance to the family, yearning for a good name, *love of learning* (italics added), and respect for other people" (p. 96).

The love of learning construct has also appeared in quantitative measures of refugee achievement. Reporting on a multi-site research project, Caplan et al. (1992) confirm that high academic achievement characterized a substantial proportion of Vietnamese (as well as Chinese-Vietnamese and Lao) students they studied. One element of the Caplan et al. (1992) project was an investigation of parental attitudes. Refugee parents were surveyed regarding the traits to which they attributed their children's success. Of the eight traits or elements provided by the survey instrument, including hard work, perseverance, luck, and fate, parents ranked "love of learning" at the top of their lists, with 99% asserting that this characteristic contributed to their children's academic achievement.

Explanations for high academic motivation found in works authored by Vietnamese refugees and in interviews of Vietnamese refugees since the 1975 exodus confirm that students continue to regard high educational achievement as a duty to parents and as a

means of gaining status within the Vietnamese community. In a recent essay contest for Vietnamese students in the United States, the winning composition, written in Vietnamese and translated into English, featured the author's sense of debt to her parents for raising her: "...I have begun to study diligently, trying my best in school to make up for the wasted time, so as to gain a bright future, a good job, and to avoid hardships in life. With a bright future, I will be able to look after my parents, repaying the debt of love and kindness they have given all these years" (Trinh, 1993, p. 13).

The status ascribed to academic success is the focus of another essay in the same contest: "It bothers me when my father runs into his friends at the supermarket and start (sic) bragging about his kids and their accomplishments.... This leads me to believe that most Vietnamese people compete with each other to climb a 'social ladder,' with possessions (including children and material goods) and accomplishments as goals" (Hoang, 1993, p. 37). Indeed, a criticism of "the Vietnamese temperament" leveled by some Vietnamese describes a tendency to compete fiercely for status and to become jealous when other Vietnamese achieve public recognition. A Vietnamese friend recently confided to me that his appointment to a position at a prestigious American university had brought him much unhappiness because of the loss of friends who had become resentful of his success. Whatever else this experience suggests about Vietnamese attitudes, it does

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show that enough importance is assigned by Vietnamese to academic recognition as to cause friends to become adversaries.

Indeed, testimonies by Vietnamese students and parents bear witness to a continuing belief among refugees that academic achievement is the primary means of their gaining respect from members of the dominant culture, as well as within their own community. Rutledge (1992), in his description of "the Vietnamese experience" in the United States, recounts a discussion with Vietnamese high school students in which one young man explains that "the only way I can get ahead and to get respect is to make good grades. I make all A's, but so do a lot of students. That's why I also try to win my science project. It helps me to be respected" (p. 93).

Attention to the opinions of outsiders is also evident in Vietnamese students' expressed belief that the status of the university they attend will affect their station. For example, Mylinh, a Chinese-Vietnamese student interviewed by Brinton and Mano (1991), explains that she wants to attend a "name" college, despite her limited English, so that people will not look down on her as a Vietnamese refugee (p. 8).

Attentiveness toward the opinions of outsiders and an academic strategy for enhancing these opinions is revealed by the language school student at the beginning of this report; a similar point of view is expressed below by a Vietnamese parent. This parent's socialization of his children includes explicit

instruction about their roles as members of a minority people in the United States.

> I also tell my kids that people value those with an education, with degrees and certificates. Asian people with black hair, black eyes, and tan skin cannot survive in a strange country if they don't try hard to get a good education. This society still has plenty of discrimination; education is the best way to get respected (Caplan et al., 1992, p. 121).

Discussion

This section offers an analysis of three elements of the love of learning trait imputed to Vietnamese that have been prominent in the discussion of Vietnamese education above. It also proposes that other immigrant groups may have ready-made, historically-cultivated strategies for creating a good impression among the dominant outsiders.

Academic Achievement in Subordinate Contexts

Vietnamese present themselves as lovers of learning because they believe that scholastic achievement advances their interests under circumstances in which outsiders threaten or control them. Analyses of Vietnamese relationships with the Chinese, with the French and, as refugees, with the Americans, indicate that Vietnamese promote a cultural identity of high intellectual cultivation.

Three fundamental characterizations of Vietnamese attitudes toward formal education can be drawn from this review. The first

is that Vietnamese may exert extraordinary effort in order to attain high academic goals. The second is that, because the standards for these goals are validated or set by outsiders, Vietnamese expect that academic achievement will elicit respect from these outsiders. Finally, because Vietnamese interpret individual success as a reflection on the group, they believe that successful Vietnamese individuals will elicit honor for the entire Vietnamese community.

The intensity of Vietnamese students' pursuit of academic success can be ascribed in part to the fact that students have historically undergone a rigorous selection process during which the great majority of potential candidates for high degrees have been eliminated from competition. Through the centuries, extraordinary effort and sacrifice have characterized the successful passage of Vietnamese students through ever-narrowing doors leading to scholar status. Those that attained the highest academic credentials also automatically bridged the social and economic gulf that separated families of scholars from all others. Because many peasants aspired to the mandarinate and, later, to higher education under the French and after 1954, the candidate pool was large and competition fierce. Furthermore, knowing that one's family and, perhaps, village depended on one's success on the examination field or in the classroom could certainly increase the intensity of a student's efforts.

Academic performance among the Vietnamese has virtually always had an orientation to the academic standards of the

nations that have threatened, controlled, or been more powerful than Vietnam. Vietnamese have not been free to develop an educational system in disregard for the principles valued by other peoples. The writing systems themselves, their literary and informational content, as well as the examination format and assessment, were all dictated by the standards of China and France. Access to the rewards and prestige bestowed on the scholarly has been limited to those who can master foreign curricula. This is also true in the United States. Although many Vietnamese send their children to Vietnamese weekend language schools, they believe that their children's primary objective is to gain mastery over the forms and content of schooling prescribed by the American mainstream.

The third aspect of the Vietnamese pursuit of academic achievement is that Vietnamese believe that success in school yields rewards far beyond the sphere of the individual. In order to stand confidently against the Chinese, Vietnamese leaders sought to present themselves, on behalf of their nation, as at least equal to the Chinese in intellectual attainment. As subjects of the French *mission civilisatrice*, colonized Vietnamese hoped that Vietnamese educational attainment would prove to the French that their charges were indeed civilized. Evidence from statements by Vietnamese refugees suggests that they also believe that being perceived as the intellectual equals of Americans is essential to their success in this society.

Generalizing this Study to Other Minorities

Some features of this analysis may be applicable to the study of the academic performance of other minorities in the United States. First, evidence from the Vietnamese experience suggests that each group's academic performance may reflect historical pre-immigration experiences that have provided them with strategies for success as immigrants. This may be particularly true for the many groups that have experienced Western colonialization. Generations of dealing with European colonizers may have provided Asians and Africans with a certain set of expectations about how to succeed with the white "outsiders" of American society.

Second, immigrants to the United States may be assumed to have a proactive cultural strategy for success in the United States. That is, those entering the United States may already have a sense of which of their cultural attributes should be emphasized so that they achieve the most desirable responses from the mainstream. Such a strategy is evident, for example, among ethnic restauranteurs. Experienced others inform cooks of what aspects of their cuisine please American customers. They adjust their menus in order to accentuate the flavors and textures that they understand will bring the most patrons. Immigrants should be given credit for being aware that how the dominant society perceives other aspects of their ethnicity will have a bearing on their success in the new environment.

The Vietnamese acceptance and promotion of an image that they are lovers of learning helps to account for the academic success of Vietnamese students. Of course, not all Vietnamese students are super achievers. Indeed, the power of the Vietnamese love of learning image for determining academic achievement can be put in a negative light as well. Nguyen (1991), for example, proposes that overly high academic hopes among recent Vietnamese arrivals are a cause of Vietnamese student delinquency.[9]

Finally, although the Vietnamese historical experience that forms the context of their educational strategy is plainly unique, Vietnamese are only one among a variety of immigrant groups that are succeeding academically in the United States. Unfortunately, the school failure of other minority populations is accentuated by some groups' school success. What this study offers that is new is to emphasize that an immigrant group may strategically promote an ethnic image that serves its interests in relationship to the majority. This study does reconfirm previous analyses that claim a pivotal role for student self-image and public image in guiding minority educational outcomes (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Wong, 1980).[10] Recognizing that the achievement gap between academically successful and unsuccessful minority groups is primarily a function of self- and ethnic image, and only secondarily one of academic skills or preparation, will enable us to be more discerning in our analyses of the school performances of all students.

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Implications of this Study

As Zanger (1991) notes in her review of recent research regarding the social and cultural dimensions of language minority education, conceptualizations of educational problems in terms of linguistic and cognitive factors have extremely limited value for explaining academic outcomes. Rather, a more crucial determinant of educational performance is attitude, that is, how teachers, students and others interpret and treat cultural and social differences. The preceding report ascribes to Vietnamese in the United States an awareness of the importance of the attitude of outsiders toward their culture. The report claims that Vietnamese have a strategy for promoting a positive attitude towards their group. The possible existence among language minorities of strategies for influencing the attitudes of the majority has implications for classroom practice and for further research.

Implications for Practice

Two implications regarding the education of Vietnamese themselves are apparent from this study. The first is addressed by Nguyen (1991), above, who warns that parents' or students' unreasonable expectations for academic excellence may discourage Vietnamese who do average work from continuing their studies and may promote delinquency. Teachers may unwittingly encourage frustration by expressing surprise that a certain Vietnamese student doesn't perform at the same level of excellence as other Vietnamese students. Perhaps the most effective response to

discouraged students is for Vietnamese college students who are personally aware of the dangers of overly ambitious expectations to provide tutoring to younger Vietnamese students and to serve as sounding boards and advisors for students who are being frustrated in their educational ambitions.

A second implication for Vietnamese students of promoting a positive ethnic image is a tendency I have observed for male Vietnamese students to associate exclusively with other Vietnamese and to become involved in violent incidents against males from other ethnic groups who offend them. This tendency has also been noted by Rumbaut and Ima (1988), who report in their study of Southeast Asians in San Diego that Vietnamese (and Lao), in contrast with Hmong and Cambodian males, "seem to be more conflict-oriented and aggressively preoccupied with 'saving face'" (p. 56). This school-site problem could by addressed by male Vietnamese college students who could share leadership in a conflict resolution program that involved Vietnamese high school students and other students who were members of the groups with which they had conflicts.

With regard to all language minority groups, teachers should be aware of the probability that students of varying ethnicities in their classrooms may perceive themselves in an us/them relationship with all others. Wanting to present the most favorable image of themselves, they may, correctly or mistakenly, interpret teachers' actions and words toward individual students of their ethnicity as representative of the teachers' attitudes

towards their group as a whole. Furthermore, educators who become aware of the power of teacher expectations to control student performance must not allow negative judgements based on stereotyped ethnic attributes to blind them to the real talents and ambitions of the individual students in their classrooms.

Implications for Research

This study has placed a greater emphasis than have previous analyses on the contribution of historical experiences to immigrant attitudes toward their minority status in the United States. One implication for further research would be to see if immigrant groups other than Vietnamese show evidence of a distinctive approach to minority status in the U.S. that may be traced to previous contacts with Europeans or Americans prior to emigration. What, for example, are the historically-derived expectations of Filipino immigrants about how they can succeed in this country? What effect do these expectations have on the actual educational outcomes of Filipino youth in the U.S.?

A second implication for research is related to recent research trends that have emphasized understanding the social contexts in which language minority students go to school. There is wide acknowledgement that the language learning and academic outcomes of minority students are largely determined by the relationships these students have with each other and with speakers of the majority language (see Wong Fillmore, 1991; Swain & Lapkin, 1981). Research has shown that students from different cultural backgrounds may respond differently to hostility from

others in their environment and that different responses are associated with different learning outcomes (Zanger, 1987).

This report has described a global strategy for success among Vietnamese, which is the promotion, within the community and towards outsiders, of an image as a studious and academically ambitious people, that is, as lovers of learning. Caplan et al. (1992), as noted, have described instantiations of this image within Vietnamese families, in which parents and siblings enthusiastically cooperate to complete homework assignments. As ethnic self-images may differ among cultural groups, corresponding differences in home and classroom strategies for fulfilling school requirements also exist. Indeed, research in elementary education, especially, has shown significant differences in how various cultural groups respond to different classroom designs. For example, the Kamehameha Early Education Project (KEEP), which contributed to improved academic performance of Hawaiian children by accommodating classroom instruction to children's home socialization patterns, had to, in turn, be modified when it was installed in a third grade classroom on a Navajo reservation (Vogt, Jordan, & Tharp, 1987). Educators found important differences between Native Hawaiian and Navajo students in preferred size and composition of peer classroom work groups.

Indeed a considerable body of research has been conducted in a number of culturally homogeneous settings (e.g. Van Ness, 1981) regarding how children, adolescents, and teachers of different

cultures organize their work, which classroom structures are favored, and what kinds of assistance students expect and seek in the classroom and among their peers. We should continue to develop a knowledge of how such preferences are played out, especially in the multicultural settings typical of many urban classrooms, particularly those in which non-native speakers of English participate. We should continue to ask, for example, under what circumstances students turn to peers for help, how assistance is elicited and offered between classmates, and how peer interaction in classroom settings is related to language and content learning. We should also learn more about how parents and students typically structure the homework environment at home. Questions such as these, which emphasize the social organization of learning events, correspond on the micro level to macro studies that ascribe contrasting general success strategies to different ethnic groups. Becoming more perceptive about potential differences in success strategies among groups and among individual students may help us to understand the contributions of different learning environments to the academic success or failure of our children.

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Endnotes

1. The Vietnamese term *hiếu học* ("to love learning" or "to be studious") is the common element in all references to "love/lover(s) of learning."

2. See Dương (1958) for a treatment of the historical Confucian basis of the educational system in Vietnam, and Shaffer, Jr. (1963) for details on the literary examinations.

3. Confucian texts promoted the stratification of society into scholars, peasant-farmers, craftsmen, and businessmen. Those in the areas of commerce were at the lowest level because of their assumed dishonesty (Henkin & Nguyen, 1981).

4. See Tai (1992, pp. 88-113) for an historical view of the education of women in Vietnam.

5. The Vietnamese original reads, *"Một người làm xấu, cả bọn mang nhơ; một người làm tốt, cả bọn đang nhờ."*

6. See Kelly (1982) for details on schooling under the French during the interwar period.

7. Among Doan's (1981) accounts of 24 famous people of Vietnam, including kings, soldiers, statesmen and poets, virtually every honored person is also described as a scholar.

8. The importance of the perceived opinions of outsiders on the status of individual Vietnamese during the French colonial period is poignantly presented in Nguyen's (1969) Vietnamese-language fictional biography. Some villagers achieve higher status among their fellow villagers by claiming to have impressed the French with putative mastery of French learning and the French language.

9. Nguyen (1991) asserts that, "like their parents, many Vietnamese youths believe that education is the only way to success. However, many are at a disadvantage because of their recent arrival and their lack of education in Vietnam. ...They hold themselves to unrealistically high standards. B's equal failure. Some benefit from the pressure and succeed. Most others, however, are crushed under their burdens of expectation" (p. 11).

10. Research on teacher expectations has confirmed that teachers' differing perceptions of members of different minority groups affect the delivery of instruction. Trueba et al. (1993) address the issue of images of minorities by contrasting positive teacher perceptions of Asians with negative images of other minorities: "Generally speaking, attitudes of school personnel towards Asians are a social response to the model minority image held by most Americans. For example, teachers imputed (impute) middle-class status to the Southeast Asian refugees ... but downgraded the performance of blacks and Hispanics" (p. 79).

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Appendix

Responses to the Good Guys Confrontation, Spring, 1991
By Students at Huong Viet Vietnamese Language Saturday School
Oakland, California
From *Đặc San Hướng Việt [Hướng Việt Magazine]*, Summer, 1990-1991

Em nghĩ vụ án tại Sacto rất là xấu hổ cho người VN. Em có thể lấy lại tiếng tăm người VN là học cho giỏi và đứng nhất trường để người ngoại quốc phải khen dân Việt Nam mình là giỏi.

Mai Hiệp/Lớp Ba B

I think that what happened in Sacramento was very shameful for Vietnamese. I can restore the reputation of the Vietnamese by studying well and being the top student in my school, so that foreigners will have to praise Vietnamese people for being intelligent.

Mai Hiep/Level 3 B

Bốn anh đó lãm mất tiếng tăm của người Việt. Em buồn tại vì người Mỹ nhịn mình không tốt. Em đi vào tiệm của Mỹ, họ tưởng đâu em ăn cắp cái gì, không phải người Việt nào cũng hư hết đâu. Bây giờ em cố gắng học, lớn lê [sic] em có việc lãm để cho người Mỹ biết là không phải người Việt nam nào cũng hư hỏng đâu.

Nguyễn Phong/Lớp 4

Those four young men have hurt the reputation of Vietnamese people. I am sad because Americans look upon us as bad. I could go into an American store and they might think that I was going to steal something, but it's not at all true that all Vietnamese are evil. Now I am working hard at my studies. When I grow up and have a job, Americans will see that not all Vietnamese are bad.

Nguyen Phong/Level 4

Dư luận vụ án đã cho rằng thanh thiếu niên VN đều hư hỏng, em không đồng ý như vậy, người VN hay là Mỹ, da đen hay da đỏ v.v... cũng có người xấu và người tốt không phải ai cũng vậy. Em sẽ cố gắng hơn nữa về việc học để cho người ta thấy rằng không phải thiếu niên VN hư hỏng đâu.

Vong Cuong/Lop 3B

Public opinion assumes that Vietnamese youth are all evil, but I don't agree with that. Vietnamese, as well as Americans, black or red, etc., have both bad and good people. Not all of any group is the same. I will try harder in my studies so that people will see that not all Vietnamese youth are bad.

Vong Cuong/Level 3B

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